

Disinformation About Religious Minorities in Bangladesh

Sourav Das

University of Kassel, Germany
s.das@uni-kassel.de

September 12, 2024

Abstract

This study investigates disinformation about the employment of religious minorities in Bangladesh's public sector. It examines the religious composition of approximately 119,436 public sector employees. The analysis reveals that the percentage of religious minorities mirrors their proportion in the overall population (which is 9 percent). This finding contradicts claims by some Islamic religious leaders and politicians of minority overrepresentation in public sector employment (which is 25-35 percent), highlighting these assertions as disinformation. Furthermore, the study examines whether the religious majority also believes such disinformation, particularly regarding the alleged overrepresentation of religious minorities. To evaluate this, a survey was conducted with 1,500 respondents in Bangladesh. The survey results align with the hypothesis, indicating that the religious majority indeed believes this disinformation.

Key-words: Disinformation, Religious Minorities, Radical Islamic Leaders, Anti-minority Hate, Public Sector Employment, Bangladesh.

JEL: D74, D83

1 Introduction

Disinformation profoundly impacts society, and its influence has intensified in recent years.¹ ² While disinformation spans various domains such as economics, politics, and religion (Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Lanoszka, 2019; Petratos, 2021), this study narrows its focus to the religious sector. Specifically, it examines disinformation targeting religious minorities, a phenomenon that has seen a significant surge in recent times.² Bangladesh presents a prime case study for investigating this issue, as disinformation targeting religious minorities is a major tool used in their persecution (Roy et al., 2023). In Bangladesh, it's common for the homes, businesses, and temples of religious minorities to be targeted and destroyed (Minority Rights Group International, 2016). This often occurs following the spread of disinformation, which incites mobs and general public unrest (Minority Rights Group International, 2016; Roy et al., 2023). Some types of disinformation can be countered by presenting accurate information to the public. However, other forms persist due to a lack of evidence, continuing to cause issues over an extended period. This study will zoom into such persistent disinformation and its long-term implications.

There are some studies that investigate easily detectable disinformation (Ng et al., 2021; Schaewitz et al., 2020; Vasist & Krishnan, 2023). However, there is a lack of empirical investigation into persistent disinformation. This is where this paper comes in.

This study delves into the persistent disinformation, particularly focusing on the alleged overrepresentation of religious minorities in Bangladesh's public sector. Islamic religious leaders, including mullahs, imams, and maulavis, as well as some politicians claim that these minorities occupy 25-35 percent of public sector jobs, despite only constituting 8-12 percent of the population.³

¹[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

²[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653641/EXPO_IDA\(2021\)653641_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653641/EXPO_IDA(2021)653641_EN.pdf)

³<https://m.u71news.com/article/145373/index.html>

⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ⁸ Moreover, various Islamic figures often depict these minorities as security threats, advocating against them.³ However, the lack of detailed religious demographic data in public sector employment makes it challenging to verify these assertions, contributing to the ongoing spread of this potentially misleading information.

This study initially investigates approximately 119,436 public sector employees across various sectors. It finds that their participation at all levels is between 9-14 percent, aligning with their proportion of the total population. By unraveling this “black box”, the study reveals the persistence of disinformation that has been propagated year after year. Additionally, given the longevity of this disinformation, it’s probable that public opinion (specifically the religious majority or Muslims) has been influenced by it. Therefore, in its second stage, the study aims to test the hypothesis of whether religious majority also believes in this disinformation.

To test the hypothesis, this study conducts a survey with around 1,500 respondents in Bangladesh. The survey results indicate that the general populace, specifically the religious majority tends to believe the disinformation. Notably, it is observed that, on average, respondents from the religious majority believe that religious minorities constitute about 33.46 percent of public sector employment. This perception is three times higher than their actual representation. This study argues that such belief in disinformation is dangerous and can increase anti-minority hate.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, Section 3 details the data and variables used in this study, Section 4 presents and discusses the results, and finally, Section 5 concludes the study.

⁴<https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2019/07/22/441999>

⁵<https://old.dailyinqilab.com/article/222187>

⁶<https://fatwaa.org/////-/>

⁷https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=1723176751181728&external_log_id=970d449a-69ca-4f69-8427-88f929bf1891&q=

⁸According to the 2022 population census, the actual percentage of religious minority is 9 percent. See Figure 6

2 Literature Review

2.1 Disinformation, Religious and Political Leaders, and Minorities

This study defines disinformation as a kind of fake news, that is intentionally created to harm certain group of the population.⁹ The influence of disinformation has magnified in the digital age, where social media platforms have become fertile ground for the rapid spread of disinformation, impacting critical areas such as electoral processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Religious minorities are often targets of various disinformation regarding their belief, values, and political alignment (Al-Zaman, 2020; Das & Schroeder, 2021). This disinformation is sometimes propagated by religious figures (Al-Zaman, 2020). When disinformation is disseminated by religious figures, given the influential role these leaders hold in molding community beliefs and actions (as detailed by Heward-Mills et al. (2018)), its potential to sway public opinion increases significantly. Disinformation aimed at religious minorities is also spread by political figures (Lee & Hosam, 2020). It has also been observed in the electoral campaign and also throughout the presidency of Donald Trump (Lee & Hosam, 2020).

In total, disinformation is easy to generate; however, it takes lots of effort to detect (Kumar & Shah, 2018). There are machine learning and deep learning methods that many studies have already used to detect disinformations (Hakak et al., 2021). If disinformation can be detected, it can significantly help to present it to the public and prevent its spread or negative influence. However, if disinformation cannot be detected, it can continue to cause harm for years. This study will focus on persistent disinformation, which is difficult to detect.

2.2 Context of Bangladesh

Research, including studies by Semyonov et al. (2004) and Scheepers et al. (2002), indicates that individuals with lower levels of education, income, and strong religious beliefs are more inclined to perceive threats about minorities. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of Bangladesh, as highlighted in the works of Hossain and Hassan (2017), Riaz (2022), and Titumir

⁹According to cambridge dictionary, Disinformation is the “false information spread in order to deceive people”.

(2021). The country is characterized by challenges such as poor quality of education, low income levels, and a strong attachment to religious beliefs. These factors collectively suggest the presence of perceived threats about minorities in Bangladesh.

Apart from this, hate speech and violence against minorities are also daily life happening in the country.¹⁰ At the same time, there is also different disinformation about minorities that caused lives of many people and many people's displacement.^{10 11} Some of these disinformations are easy to detect (following the methods explained by Hakak et al. (2021)) and violence caused by disinformation can be stopped. But some of these disinformation are not detectable, due to the non availability of data and continue causing harm to the religious minorities. For such kind of disinformation, as anti rumor agent (as explained in the rumor transmission theory¹²) is absent that's why people are more likely to be affected by this and as a result religious minorities face more hate and more discrimination.

Although there are many reserach about anti- minority hate in bangladesh (Al-Zaman, 2020; Minar & Naher, 2018; Roy et al., 2023), however, there is a notable gap in terms of understanding whether there is any such kind of persistent disinformation that disseminate taking the advantage of the absense of anti-rumor agent. This paper aims to address this critical void, focusing on disformation that are difficult to detect.

The study specifically focuses on information indicating the overrepresentation of religious minorities in Bangladesh. Such information is largely disseminated by some religious leaders and politicians, as mentioned in the earlier section. The information has been circulating for years, claiming that religious minorities fill 25-35 percent of the total job positions in the public sector, despite making up only 9 percent of the total population. This study suggests that since religious minorities go through the same education system as the religious majority,¹³ it is unlikely for their participation to be

¹⁰<https://en.prothomalo.com/topic/Communal-violence>

¹¹<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/bangladesh-protection-of-hindu-s-and-others-must-be-ensured-amid-ongoing-violence/>

¹²Liu et al. (2022) elucidate the pathways through which rumors, irrespective of their nature, are disseminated (that's why it is called rumor transmission theory). This study posits that disinformation concerning the labor market involvement of religious minorities follows similar transmission channels, where in the absence of an anti-rumor agent, disinformation can spread without any deterrence.

¹³It is important to acknowledge that in addition to the common education system, there is also a religious education system that persists in Bangladesh, such as the Madrassas.

25-35 percent. If their participation is not within the 25-35 percent range but similar to their percentage in the total population, then the information about their participation claimed by some religious leaders and politicians is nothing but disinformation. However, as it is spread by religious and political leaders, and there is no data available to challenge the disinformation, this type of disinformation will cause people to believe it and spread anti-minority hate. That's why in the second stage, this study tests whether the religious majority also believes this disinformation.

3 Data and Variables

This study employs a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Initially, this study conducts a comprehensive review of various government websites, spanning from top-tier entities like ministries and universities to mid-level districts (District) and lower-level sub-districts (Upazila) between June and September 2023. At the top level, this study focuses on the websites of ministries where government employee lists are available, including names. In Bangladesh's context, it is possible to infer an individual's religion based on their name, although this method is not without its limitations. For instance, it cannot accurately identify atheists. The subsequent survey of this study reveals that approximately 1.6 percent of the population in Bangladesh identifies themselves as atheists (see Figure 7), suggesting a potential 1.6 percent margin of error in our religious classification based on names.

This study meticulously examines names of individuals in key positions like secretaries, additional secretaries, and joint secretaries across various ministries. In universities, the focus was on academic staff, including lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors. This detailed manual analysis of names across multiple levels of government and educational institutions aimed to provide a comprehensive view of the religious landscape in these sectors.

At the district level, this study conducts an extensive review of various government office websites. This includes the District Education Office, District Police Superintendent's Office, District Agricultural Extension Department Office, and so on (for a comprehensive list of all the offices, visit: <https://www.sirajganj.gov.bd/> or any other similar websites). This study

Although the common education system is the first choice of a large part of the population.

applies a similar approach at the upazila level, exploring the websites of respective local government offices.

This study also obtains a comprehensive list of all Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) officers from 1982 to the present from the Bangladesh Civil Service website. These officers primarily serve at various administrative levels, including upazila, district, and ministry. This list will be instrumental in providing an overview of the evolving recruitment trends across different regimes.

Finally, this study conducts a survey with around 1,500 participants in Bangladesh. The methodology involves stratified random sampling. As a part of stratified random sampling, this study initially segregates the sample into rural and urban groups. These are further divided by gender, creating male and female subcategories. Within these gender-specific subcategories, this study classifies respondents into five distinct occupational categories: students, government employees, private sector employees, businessmen, and day laborers. Data collection is focused on two major regions of Bangladesh: Dhaka and Mymensingh. The data collection takes place between July and September 2023. After the data cleaning, this study uses around 1300 observations for the empirical analysis.

4 Results and Discussion

Figures 1 & 2 illustrate that religious minorities are respectively 8.92 and 10.51 percent at the ministry and university levels. The pattern of figures 1 and 2 holds true at the mid-level (District level), where religious minorities comprise 13.46 percent of employees. Interestingly, at the lower tier (Upazila level), their representation is almost the same as the district level (13.75 percent). It should be noted that figures 1-4 are based on the most recent information available on websites. Due to the lack of historical employment data on websites, it is not feasible to construct a historical trend line. To address this, this study subsequently collects data on Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment to analyze and present these trends.

Figure 5 depicts the recruitment trends in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) from 1982 to the present. The data indicates that, on average, the percentage of religious minorities in BCS recruitment so far stands at 12.44 percent (taking the average of the complete trend). The trend line of Figure 5 also helps to observe the recruitment trends across different regimes. Under

military rule until 1990, religious minority recruitment in the public sector averaged 12.51 percent (see Table 3). However, since the emergence of the two dominant political parties in post-1991 – the Awami League-led liberals and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led right-wingers – the recruitment of religious minorities has not exceeded 15 percent under either regime. Specifically, during the BNP-led right-wing tenure, the recruitment rate for religious minorities in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) was 9.04 percent. In contrast, under the Awami League-led liberals, this rate increased slightly to 14.14 percent (details in Table 3).¹⁴

In examining the full hierarchy of government employment, it becomes clear that the average participation rate of religious minorities closely matches their proportion in the total population, which is nearly 9% according to the latest census (see Figure 6). However, a tier-specific analysis reveals some disparities. At the ministry level, the representation of religious minorities is less than their proportion in the general population. In contrast, at the mid or lower (district or upazila) level, their participation slightly exceeds their population share. The slight rise in the representation of minorities is consistent with expectations, given the quota benefits extended to groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and some other minority communities across the country in various government jobs. These measures are likely to contribute to a slight increase in the overall proportion of minorities in these roles. But in total, they are not overrepresented at all. The same result can be seen in the historical trend.

Consequently, these findings contradict claims by some Islamic religious leaders, including mullahs, imams, and maulavis, as well as some politicians, of minority overrepresentation in public sector employment.

So, the analysis leads to a significant conclusion: the claims made by certain religious leaders and politicians—that religious minorities comprise 25-50 percent of Bangladesh’s public sector is unsubstantiated and constitutes disinformation. This revelation is akin to “opening a black box”, as the Bangladeshi government does not publicly disclose the religious demographics of its public sector employees. This lack of data has historically made it challenging to verify the accuracy of such claims. However, this study has effectively opened the black box, revealing that these religious

¹⁴It is noteworthy that these BCS officers eventually serve at various levels, including ministries, districts, and upazilas. So, the data depicted in Figures 1, 3, and 4 are largely based on them.

leaders and politicians have been propagating disinformation, potentially fueling anti-minority sentiments.

This persistent disinformation, which has been circulating in society for years, likely influenced public opinion, specifically the religious majority. This was a key motivator to conduct the survey in the next step. The survey results are quite revealing. On average, the religious majority believes that the participation rate of religious minorities in public sector jobs is 33.46 percent, a figure that is more than three times higher than their actual participation rate (see Table 1). This clearly indicates that the religious majority strongly believes in this disinformation.

This study does not claim that the widespread belief among the religious majority is the causal effect of the disinformation spread by some religious leaders and politicians. The study examines two different aspects - one focuses on how some religious leaders and politicians spread disinformation about public sector jobs held by religious minorities, and the other explains how people in the religious majority tend to believe this disinformation and share the same opinions as the religious leaders. The study argues that this belief among the religious majority is dangerous because it creates a sense of a real threat among them, making them believe that their opportunities for employment are being taken away by minority groups. By applying the principles of racial threat theory¹⁵, it becomes clear that such perceived threats can lead to negative attitudes and behaviors toward minorities. At the same time, due to the absence of data and fact-checking, the challenger or anti-rumor agent is largely absent here, which makes the spread of disinformation smoother. This process aligns with the structural model proposed by Schlueter and Scheepers (2010).

It's important to note that the belief about the overrepresentation of religious minorities is primarily held by the religious majority. The survey for this study also includes responses from religious minorities. However, their average belief is about 12.05 percent, which is very close to the actual

¹⁵Blalock's racial threat theory posits that an increase in the relative size of minority groups (based on race or ethnicity) compared to the majority may be perceived as a threat to majority. This perception stems from the anticipation of negative outcomes, leading to the portrayal of minority groups as potential dangers (Blalock, 1967). However, empirical investigations into this theory have produced varied results. Semyonov et al. (2004) find that larger minority populations tend to escalate the perception of threat among majority groups. On the other hand, the findings of Hjerm (2007) present a contrasting view, suggesting no correlation.

percentage of religious minorities in the overall population.

In total, there are numerous factors contributing to the rise of anti-minority sentiments in Bangladesh. Previous explanations have primarily focused on how hate preachers use provocative language, leading to acts of violence and the destruction of homes, temples, and properties owned by minorities (Roy et al., 2023). However, this study reveals a new dimension to this issue. This study demonstrates that persistent disinformation requires more attention as it can cause long-term harm to religious minorities.

5 Conclusion

This study has two major contributions. First, it reveals that minorities in Bangladesh are not overrepresented in public sector jobs, as claimed by some Islamic religious leaders and politicians. This claim is nothing but disinformation. Second, the study also finds evidence that the religious majority also strongly believes in this disinformation.

It is important to mention that this study does not deal with causality. Based on the final result and the introduction of this paper, it is evident that some religious leaders and politicians play a significant role in spreading the disinformation about labor market participation of religious minorities. However, it is unclear whether the percentage of the religious majority believing in this disinformation is a result of the speeches of some religious leaders and politicians or if there is a reverse causality, where people already hold these beliefs due to historical reasons and religious leaders simply exploit it. Due to data limitations¹⁶, this study did not explore this aspect and considers it a potential area for future research.

¹⁶Due to security concerns for the enumerator, some questions could not be asked on the ground.

6 References

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7 Figures & Tables

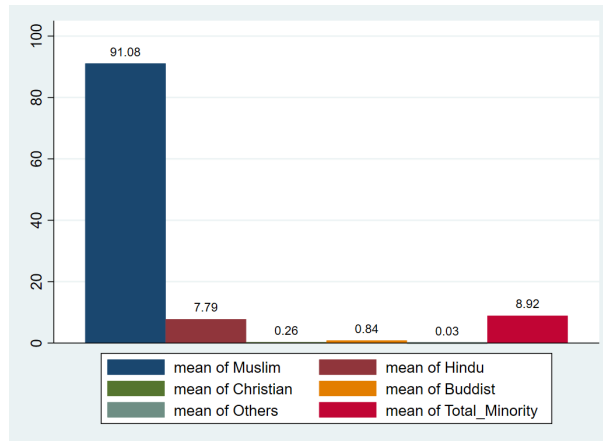


Figure 1: Religious Demography at Ministry Level Jobs

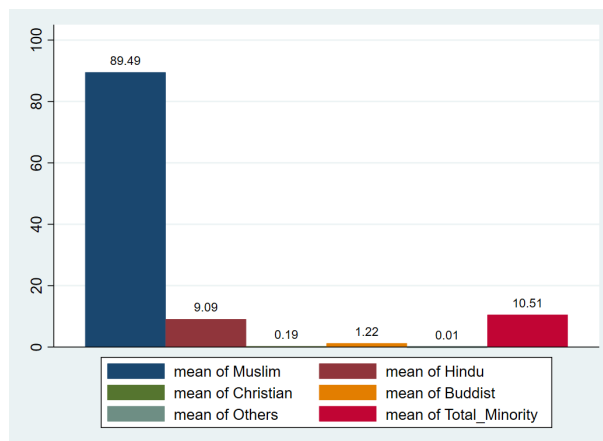


Figure 2: Religious Demography at University Level Jobs

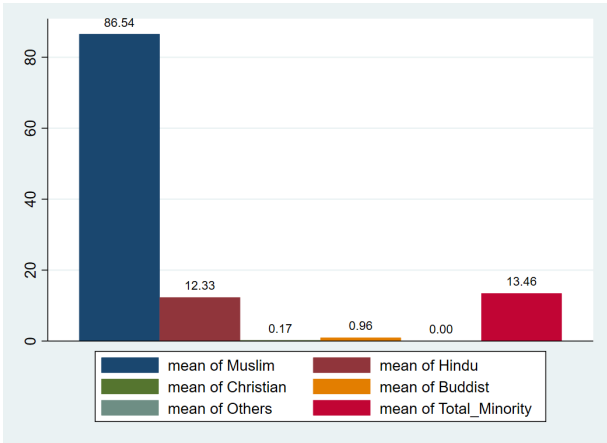


Figure 3: Religious Demography at District Level Jobs

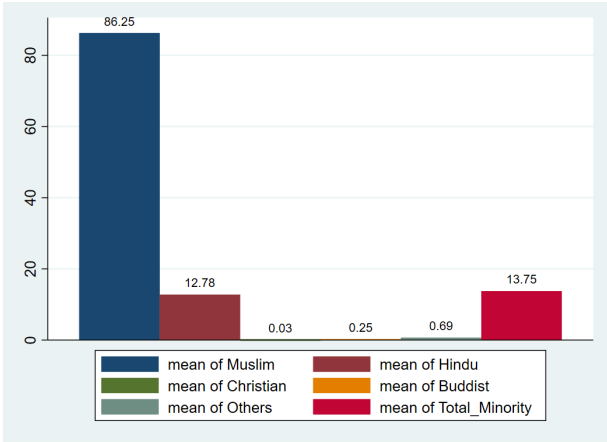


Figure 4: Religious Demography at Upazila Level Jobs

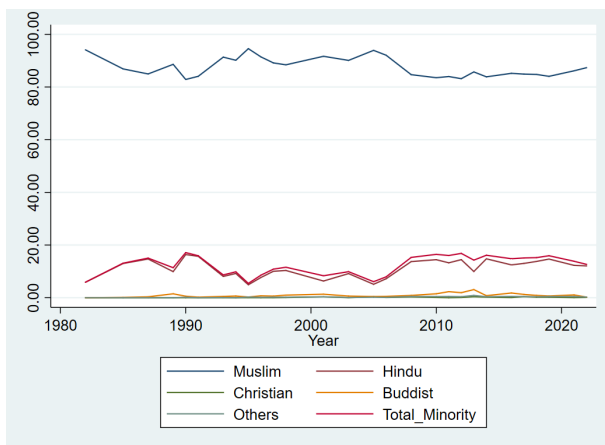


Figure 5: Religious Composition of Top Govt Officials From 1982-2022

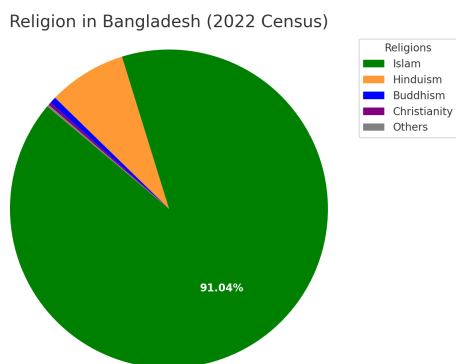


Figure 6: Religious Demography from the Census 2022

For more detailed information about the census, refer to the link in the footnote.¹⁷

¹⁷[https://sid.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/sid.portal.gov.bd/publications/01ad1ffe_cfef_4811_af97_594b6c64d7c3/PHC_Preliminary_Report_\(English\)_August_2022.pdf](https://sid.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/sid.portal.gov.bd/publications/01ad1ffe_cfef_4811_af97_594b6c64d7c3/PHC_Preliminary_Report_(English)_August_2022.pdf)

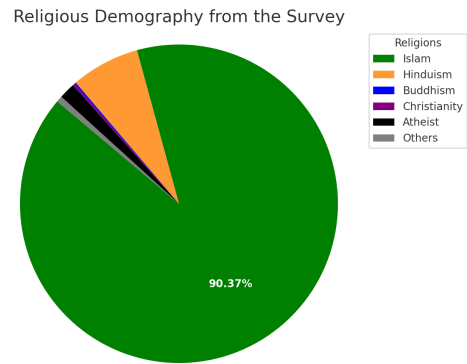


Figure 7: Religious Demography from the Survey

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Religious Majority, Specifically Muslims

	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Perceived percentage	1,139	33.46%	14.54%	3%	85%
Age	1,159	28.35	8.00	18	70
Area	1,163	0.56	0.50	0	1
Gender	1,164	0.62	0.49	0	1
Education	1,157	3.28	1.94	0	8
Pray time	1,147	2.52	1.95	0	5

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Religious Minority, Specifically Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian

	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Perceived percentage	96	12.05%	7.76%	1.1%	40%
Age	97	30.06	9.37	19	61
Area	98	0.61	0.49	0	1
Gender	98	0.65	0.48	0	1
Education	96	4.07	1.63	0	7
Pray time	96	1.59	1.12	0	5

Table 3: Average Percentage of Different Religious Groups

	In total	Military regime	BNP-led right-wing regime	Awame league-led liberal regime
Muslim	87.56%	87.49%	90.96%	85.85%
Hindu	11.16%	11.97%	8.38%	12.28%
Christian	0.10%	0%	0.06%	0.15%
Buddist	0.92%	0.51%	0.49%	1.31%
Others	0.26%	0.04%	0.11%	0.41%
Total Minority	12.44%	12.51%	9.04%	14.15%